

# Composing “Good Timber”



## 1. Finding a text that suits an ensemble.

I was interested in writing a new work for Nova Voce which would highlight its particular sound and character as well as utilize the talents of our accompanist.

I knew that the theme for our spring concert was “Hope and Inspiration” and was drawn to an old inspirational poem I knew called “Good Timber” written by Douglas Malloch as a possible text.

Douglas Malloch (1877-1938), known as the "Lumbermen's Poet," compares good men to good timber in this famous metaphorical poem. The message of this poem is that people, like trees, grow and reach their true potential by overcoming adversity. It is only through struggles, like a tree fighting through forest growth to reach the sun, that we grow and discover our true potential. Malloch lived in Michigan where he grew up amongst logging camps and lumber yards.

As a child our family often vacationed in these northern Michigan and Northern Ontario “forests” so this poem had a personal connection to me and the connection to the trees spoke to me even more as I get into “old age”! Now that I have moved to Nova Scotia I continue to notice those “trees” that survive the storms and hurricanes and those that don’t.

## 2. Poem Analysis

So now to the music composition process. It starts with an analysis of the poem structure and its overriding themes and metaphors. (All this gives rise to composition ideas in the form of tonality, harmony, counterpoint, timbre and form.)

***Good Timber*** is a four-stanza poem that is separated into sets of six lines, or sextets and follows a consistent and structured rhyme scheme. The lines conform to a pattern of aabbcc, alternating as the poet saw fit from stanza to stanza. This was a common structure for Malloch. His rhyming pairs carry a reader through the piece from beginning to end. The couplets give the poem a sing song-like sound, resembling a song lyric.

This clearly indicates to me a composition in four sections. As well as providing an indication to me as the style of each section and how they are related thematically. I also now have “scanned” the text with the various rhythmic possibilities and developed an initial “rhythm” score (Rhythms BUT no notes yet.) Some ideas for how the various vocal parts will interact is also emerging. (For example, do I sense lower voices only, higher voices only, unison, harmony, a Capella etc.)

This entire poem is one extended metaphor comparing trees to human beings. The tree mentioned in the first stanza represents someone who has never had to fight for anything in their life. This man had more than enough “sun and sky and air and light.” Although this initially seems like a good thing, the speaker turns the text in a different direction.

These flourishing “trees” or coddled people do not live good, or even full, lives. They are often struck down and come to death as “scrubby things[s].” This type of person is contrasted with one who “does not grow with ease.” Their life might be rougher, but they are made of “Good timber.” This leads into the most important theme of this piece, that struggle is necessary to live a full life. Those who live through “broken branches” and storms will become “Good timber.” These are the men who must fight, from birth, to survive. Their broken branches and scars are evidence of their ability to survive on and become “forest king[s].” (This theme is common within Malloch’s work. He was often concerned with depicting different ways life can be lived and how the most fulfilling lives come to be)

These “Themes and Metaphors” lead me as composer to certain kinds of “harmonic structures” and overall “tonal center”. (This is also determined by what notes and “keys” I feel are the best sound qualities of Nova Voce!) Certain musical “motifs” are starting to emerge: a motif for “tree”, a motif for “rain”, a motif for “sky”, a motif for “air”, a motif for “light”, a motif for “man”, a motif for “strength”, a motif for “ease”, etc. (In this case a motif can be a short (3 to 7) note melodic pattern, a “chord” associated with an element, a short rhythmic pattern, a counterpoint idea, etc.

The next process is a full stanza analysis which will give way to more “form” structure for the composition.

#### **Stanza One**

The tree that never had to fight  
For sun and sky and air and light,  
But stood out in the open plain  
And always got its share of rain,  
Never became a forest king  
But lived and died a scrubby thing.

In the first stanza of this piece the speaker begins by describing one particular type of tree and the life it lived. It is clear from the first stanza that the tree is standing in for a human being. There is an extended metaphor that stretches the length of the poem through which Malloch uses trees to represent humans and the different lives they lead.

He speaks first on the “tree that never had to fight.” From just this line it is clear that he is looking down on this type of person. The “fight” already feels necessary. In the next lines he describes how the tree, or person, who lives an easy life does not worry about resources. They have all the food, water, air and light they need to survive. These needs don’t register for them. Additionally, due to their position, they “always” get enough rain.

The position of the tree speaks to the way that one’s lot in life is determined by their birth. One cannot choose the life they were born into. The tree did not have to fight for what it has. In the last two lines the speaker reveals the outcome of such a life. This kind of tree will never become a “forest king,” or one of the largest, strongest trees in the forest. It will live and die “a scrubby thing.” It may have a position, but that position did nothing to further its interior strength.

### **Stanza Two**

The man who never had to toil  
To gain and farm his patch of soil,  
Who never had to win his share  
Of sun and sky and light and air,  
Never became a manly man  
But lived and died as he began.

In the next six lines the speaker compares the tree to the man who never “became a manly man.” This person lived a similar life. He never had to “toil / To gain and farm his patch of soil.” Just like the tree was given all the elements of life it needed, so too was the man given his “share” without effort.

The last two lines solidify the comparison between the man and the tree. He “lived and died as he began” without development. His position, socially, morally and economically did not improve because he did not feel the need to reach beyond his readily available resources.

### **Stanza Three**

Good timber does not grow with ease,  
The stronger wind, the stronger trees,  
The further sky, the greater length,  
The more the storm, the more the strength.  
By sun and cold, by rain and snow,  
In trees and men good timbers grow.

The third stanza is dedicated to describing what does make “Good,” or strong, “timber.” A tree that is going to live a long and successful life “does not grow with ease.” It encounters throughout its days “stronger wind” and “further sky” than the “scrubby” tree ever did. It also lives through more storms and an uncertain amount of sun, cold and “rain and snow.” The final line joins together the tree of good timber with the “manly man.” The same forces forged both types of life.

### **Stanza Four**

Where thickest lies the forest growth

We find the patriarchs of both.  
And they hold counsel with the stars  
Whose broken branches show the scars  
Of many winds and much of strife.  
This is the common law of life.

In the last six lines the speaker goes on to describe the environment of the man and the good timber tree. Both are in the “thickest” part of the forest. This contrasts with the tree of the first stanza. It grew in an opening in the forest canopy. The men and trees are in the shade and far from the sun.

They are both the “patriarchs” or male leaders of their species. From where they are situated, away from the light of the sun and city, they can “hold counsel with the stars.” They tap into a deeper knowledge, and commune with forces that others cannot understand. The tree and the man share “broken branches” and “scars.” The “strife” of their lives has become the “common law.” It structures who they are and how they live.

### **3. Turning this poem analysis into a new piece of music**

How to write down that first note? **Section 1. Stanza 1.** The choice was to use “A” and “D” as the tonal centers. (Nova Voce loves to sing these notes!) The opening melodies first in the baritones then Tenor 2, then Tenor 1 t1 and 2 (b22) all parts (b27) are all “modal” and not “major or minor”. Modal is an OLDER style scale indicate of the age of the trees. Each melodic fragment has an “echo” like the trees are “waving in the wind.” Some harmony is started in the “Oh” at the beginning (This harmony will become the “tree” harmony later) and carried through under the melodic fragments together with a few text punctuations for key words “fight”, “light”, “plain” and “rain”. These phrases then culminate in the chord on “died” and the rhythmic resolution of the interval of the second on “scrubby thing” back to the tonal center “d”. This section concludes on a full version of the “tree” chord on the word “tree” with a crescendo to the rhythmic word “never” and resolution to “d” on “had to fight”.

We then add in the piano part. The strong opening using the harmonies of the chords to be used throughout the piece in “bell like” style. The idea here was to suggest the “majesty and awe” of the large forest trees standing side by side. These piano chords sound again, followed by the gentle “rain like” descending modal scale patterns eventually leading to the strong “bell like” tree chords to end the section.

**Section 2. Stanza 2.** This section expands on the melody of the first section by creating a melodic fragment for each on the first four lines of the stanza that are interrelated. This “melody” is presented first in the bass part. This melody rises then falls over the 12 bars and also rises and falls in dynamics. Now the counterpoint fun begins as this melody is presented in a “canon” form one part after another, each part having the same shape. This allows each part to have it’s own “crescendo” to the words “win his share”: first the bass, then the baritone, then tenor 2 then tenor 1. Each part in turn working to “win its share!” as the other parts fade out and ending on a unison “b”. This section is based on the pitches “e” and “b”, one tone

above the first section. Meanwhile, the rhythmic structure has developed into a “driving” rhythm that signifies “work and toil”. The piano provides the left hand octaves “inversion” of the melody again representing “toil” or “work” (almost machine like) while the right hand has the “falling rain” scales. The last two lines of this stanza are similar to the last two lines of stanza one, so the music returns to a similar style moving from the unison “e” to the beautiful c major chord on the word “man”! This quickly returns to the “died” chord and the strong dissonance on the last line as was the case for the word “scrubby”.

Section 3. Stanza 3. There is a slow quiet transition into this section from the piano, using the previous melodic fragments again and returning us to the original tonal center of “A” and “E”. We start in unison (as a show of strength for this section). After the initial melody (in the High register Bass and Baritone for the first time) the tenors are added in a mid register to make a beautiful sonority with the bass part providing the “foundation” or “roots”. IN contrast to the rhythmic counterpoint of section two, we then enter the first “homophonic” section almost like a hymn or chorale from bar 76 to 94. This begins medium soft and crescendos to fortissimo and beyond on “Good Timbers Grow”. The crescendo represents the “growth” of the trees. Harmonically, there is a “recap” and “revoicing” of the “man” and “tree” chords this time ending on the unison “d” as was the case to end part one.

Section 4. Stanza 4. The piano starts with a recap” of the “toil” in the bass octaves, the “rain” in the right hand scales and the “strength” in the bell like chords all intertwined. The voiced parts “recap” the counterpoint of section 2 BUT this time do a crescendo throughout instead of a rise and fall in dynamics. This leads to a beautiful dissonant chord on the word “scars” and leads into the final two lines. These line return to the “chorale” style of part three. Bar 120 returns to the “c major” / “a minor” chord representing man on the word “life” as the tenors finally “shine” leaving the second tenors alone in b 121. Then the final chords in bar 124 a much more “triumphant” sound with the reprise of bar 32 and ending on the glorious “d Major” chord that has been implied throughout but not achieved until the end.